

Winter Semester 2021/2022

SDAC Guest Lecture Series

Hard to Tell: Bureaucratic Encounters, Religious Sincerity, and Judicial Decision-Making in Jewish Conversion in Israel

Michal Kravel-Tovi
Tel Aviv University
AnthropologyTuesday
01.02.22
4-6pm c.t.

Michal Kravel-Tovi is an associate professor of socio-cultural anthropology at Tel Aviv University. She works at the intersection of political anthropology, the ethnography of religion, and Jewish studies. Her projects include failed messianism among Chabad Hasidism, state-run Jewish conversion in Israel, the construction of an identity- and demographic crisis among American Jewry, and emerging “Me-Too” activism among ultra-Orthodox pious Jews in Israel. Her book *When the State Winks: The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israel* received in 2018 the second prize of the Clifford Geertz Prize Award of the American Anthropological Association and won in the same year the Jordan Schnitzer Book Award of the Association of Jewish Studies.

Bureaucrats generally have limited time to decide if the person appearing before them is indeed who he or she claims to be. Is he “really poor”? Does she really fall within the designated category entitling subsidization and public housing? Is he truly a political refugee deserving our compassion? Is she really a pacifist justifying an exemption from army service? In this talk, we will engage with such questions to probe broader problematizations of decision making embedded in bureaucratic encounters. In particular, we will engage with how the thin encounter permitted by bureaucratic settings shape the ways in which bureaucrats interrogate their clients and scrutinize their sincerity. We will do so through anthropological engagement with the case study of religious conversion in Israel. In Israel, religious conversion is a highly bureaucratized state-run endeavor. Rabbinic judges generally have from thirty to sixty minutes to decide if the person they encounter in the court is a worthy and trustworthy candidate for Jewish conversion. In order to decide whether they can authorize the applicant’s conversion, they must attain sufficient knowledge of the candidate’s practices, habits and motivations they find intrinsic to the conversion process and its appropriate gatekeeping. We will discuss dynamics of suspicion and trust, and the fraught strategies and predicaments of decision-making.



*Photo taken from: Flash 90

This event will be held via zoom.
Please contact Prof. Dr. Dominik Müller to register
(dominik.m.mueller@fau.de).



ELITE MASTER'S PROGRAM
Standards of Decision-Making Across Cultures